

John 8:31-38
The Truth Will Set You Free
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
11-7-21

Friends we are here in this place together today, and obviously there is a lot swirling in the air right now. Questions, anxieties, confusion, frustration, far more than we can address right now. It would be perfectly understandable for any of us to have checked out from the service a while ago. But I want ask you, to the best of our ability, to place all of that aside for now and let's attend to God's Word to us this morning. I can tell you this, that in the most anxious and uncertain moments in my life there is something that happens, a balm that comes over me, when I immerse myself in the Word. This morning the Word is followed by the Sacrament of Communion, and I hope that these can be orienting to us in a tremendously disorienting moment. This morning I have invited Lillian Meadows to read God's Word to us, Lillian would you come up and lead us?

John 8:31-36 Text

Freedom and Truth. There is freedom in speaking the truth. The truth is also the pathway to freedom. Oh how much we all need to hear and let this message sink down into our bones. Because telling the truth can be painful, but it always leads to freedom. And freedom is not always what we think it is, that which we think will make us free can actually lead us to bondage, and the things we think impinge upon our freedom may actually be the most freeing things in the world.

This morning from our text I want to focus on three main questions: What is freedom? What is the enemy of freedom? And who is the source of true freedom?

What is freedom?

Several years ago a professor named Mark Lilla wrote an article for the New York Times Magazine in which he said that when he was a teenager he flirted with Born Again Christianity. Then he read the chapter in the bible about being born again from John 3 where Jesus is talking to Nicodemus. After reading it and reflecting so many years later on the experience this is how he described it:

One thing Jesus seems to be telling Nicodemus is that he must recognize his own insufficiency -- that he will have to turn his back on his autonomous, seemingly happy life and be reborn as a human being who understands his dependency on something greater. That seems a radical challenge to our freedom, and it is. Lilla decided not to go forward with the born again thing because it seemed like too radical of a challenge to his freedom.

Is following Jesus bring an end to our freedom? Well yes, and no.

The people who are still around and following Jesus hear him begin to speak to them about freedom. People in Jesus' day knew what it was like to live a life that was built around certain expectations and constraints. The constraints of the law were set forth to provide a framework or structure within which people's lives could be lived and find meaning. But much of it was how to observe religious practices, how to eat, when to worship, it was very prescriptive and not very intimate or relational, it became something that was burdensome and not at all life affirming.

But along comes Jesus who says this in verse 31 if you abide in my word, or another translation puts it, if you obey my teaching, you are my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. What he is saying is that if we allow our lives to be guided by his constraints we will become more free. Jesus' constraints are different from the world's. The world says the way to freedom is to shed any semblance of constraint. It is freedom from.... Freedom is doing whatever I want whenever I want and not necessarily concerning myself with others. In other words, the less we are constrained by the things around us, the more we are free.

But is this really freedom? Doing whatever pleases us whenever we want? Think about this simple example, someone with high cholesterol or another health condition says I can eat whatever I want because I'm free to do so. While that may be true, it may not go well for them in the long run. There may not be a lot of flourishing ahead of them. But when a doctor comes along and says, you've got to cut out this and this and this, in order to live longer, they are putting constraints on their life, but they're the good kind of constraints.

Jesus tells us here that the key to true freedom is to be bound by the right kind of constraint. This is the kind of constraint that doesn't restrict us, but actually provides the environment for which life, peace, wholeness, safety, meaning are able to flourish.

We have several immensely talented musicians up here, and most all of us cannot do what they can do. We are not free to play the piano or organ like Rick or Jane or Michelle do. That's because when we were younger we preferred to do other things, or didn't have the opportunity to learn. I don't know about you, but I much preferred to play baseball at the park than sit inside and practice piano—that's why I only lasted a year on it. In one way or another these three chose to be constrained by the need or desire to practice and not play ball or do other things because they wanted to learn how to play their instrument. It was the right kind of constraint that now allows them to play beautifully, and we're grateful that they share it with us each week.

Jesus says my word is what Pastor and Theologian Tim Keller calls, a liberating constraint. Jesus' word that says to us that it is better to give than to receive—so being a person who is constrained by the need to think about others over oneself all the time. Being a selfish person who only considers their own needs might sound to some like freedom. But God's Word says that there is more freedom in loving and considering and working for your neighbor than there is in just doing what suits you all the time.

If you look at the Ten Commandments you can see that there are constraints that they put on our freedoms. We're not free to steal from each other, we're not free to treat our neighbors with disregard or contempt. But if you invert each of these commands and look at what Earl Palmer calls the grand positive of the thou shalt not there is a freedom there. Thou shalt not steal. The liberating constraint is that we are freed from envy and have the chance to honor one another's belongings.

Enemy of Freedom

Next the enemy of Freedom. In our culture we think that anything that restricts our freedom or gets in the way of me being me, me doing what I want to do is the enemy of freedom. That the forces that restrict freedom are out there. But look again at verses 33-35.

They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever.

Jesus is speaking to good Jewish people who believe that they are free because of their inherited relationship to Abraham. Their lineage, they believe entitles them to certain ways of seeing themselves in relationship to God. We’ve never been enslaved by anyone. Why does this Jesus talk about freedom as if we’re enslaved?

But, the truth is that God doesn’t have grandchildren. Jesus says your freedom doesn’t come because of whose house you happen to be born into. He says anyone who commits a sin is a slave. And when a person sins they lose access to what Jesus calls the house where the son resides. The son has access and remains in the house forever, but those who sin are not given a place in that dwelling place by their own doing.

In this scene there is a deep sense of entitlement, its something we see all around us. The Jews said we are Abraham’s, we have all we need to have the place with God secure. What do you mean we’re slaves to sin? We’re members of a church, we give money, we show up Sundays, what do you mean we’re slaves to sin? We’re Americans, or we’re white, or we’re men, or we’re of this political party or that, or we’ve made all the right moves in life to cultivate this identity. What do you mean we’re slaves to sin?

This is what makes sin so destructive. It’s not just a transgression of the law or breaking of the commandments, but it is a self-centered entitlement, it’s using people rather than serve them. This is another way the bible characterizes the human heart, it is a deep self-centeredness that seeks to live for you own self-interest without regard for anyone else. This is really the modern view of freedom, and you can see why it’s so popular and it’s so pernicious.

But here is what we need to see, self-centeredness destroys love—which is the ultimate freedom. Humans were meant to live in loving friendships, loving relationships, marriages, family, this is the environment in which we were meant to flourish. This is the environment in which we are truly free. Our modern understanding of freedom tends to think that a person is more free when they have fewer constraints, even people constraints. The less I have to think about others, and the more I am able to focus on my needs, the more free I am.

Liberating Freedom

Ironically this is exactly the opposite of what true freedom is. Love is the environment where freedom flourishes. Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, serve one another in love, let love abound more and more. The bible makes it really clear that the more we focus on getting our own needs met, the more we believe we are entitled to certain things because of our identity, or ethnicity, or socioeconomic class, or membership, the smaller and more constrained our lives will be.

We become free when we live in the environment in which we were meant to live, when we swim with the current, rather than against it—as it were.

Listen, if there were a fish up here on the chancel out of water it would flop around and gasp for air,

because fish are not meant to live on stages in churches. But put it in a tank of water and it will dart around and swim uninhibited, because that is the environment in which the fish was meant to live.

We are meant to flourish in the environment of love, not self-centeredness self-love, but the love that gives to others, the love that delights in truth with our family and spouses, the kind of love that considers others more important than oneself, and even gives ones life and comfort and wellbeing up for another. Why? Because that is what Jesus did for us. This is how Jesus loved us. Jesus invites us by faith into his family and calls us son or daughter, and gives us an identity.

The best analogy I can think of for this is Downton Abbey. For those of you that have seen Downton, you know there is a big house and a lord of the manor, and there are children, and domestic servants. The servants are brought into the house to work and serve, but if one of the workers disobeys or acts in a way that damages the manor, the Lord sends them away. But the children of the Lord, when they act up there is love and safety and place for them. This relationship is one of unconditional love and not based on good works.

Jesus says the only way we will be able to live in such a way that sin doesn't continue to erode our lives is if we stop thinking of God as boss whom we have to do all the right things for and obey the owners manual. We must have our relationship to God changed, we've got to become children—sons and daughters—and the only one who can do that is Jesus Christ.

How do we do this? We come near to Jesus. Jesus is the one who adopts us, giving us his identity as the one who was not just with Abraham, but was the one who created and who gave Abraham his identity. Later in the chapter John says truly truly before Abraham was born, I am. Jesus is giving them the same name that same identity that God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, I am. This is his identity. And Jesus this same identity as Lord of all, Jesus will allow to be nailed to the cross and crucified for our sin. The Lord will take all of the evil and sin of the world, that he could justifiably simply cast away, and he takes it all on himself and dies for it so that we might continue to be sons and daughters.

Jesus gives us his unconditional love because our sins are paid for and so we are transformed into this love relationship. Jesus gave up his identity and his place in order to be in this love relationship with us. The way we enter into deeper freedom in love is by giving up our independence, giving up our self-centeredness, by giving ourselves fully to others in love.

God gave up all freedom by entering into our world in the manger to be with us. That is a powerful and mind-bending reality to consider. God gave up God's freedom to descend to us and become like the sinful and self-serving creation, so that God might serve the creation in the second person of the trinity Jesus. God gave up more than we will ever be able to comprehend, and the motive and purpose behind it...love.

Once we see what he has done for us and believe in it, it turns a slave into a child, duty becomes choice, and the environment in which our new identity flourishes is love. Let's pray.